*Out of the Blue* (2006) directed by Robert Sarkies

Reviews and extra information

Ordinary people find extraordinary courage in the face of madness. On 13-14 November 1990 that madness came to Aramoana, a small New Zealand seaside village. It came in the form of a lone gunman with a high-powered semi-automatic rifle. As he stalked his victims the terrified and confused residents were trapped in the village for 24 hours while a handful of under-resourced and underarmed local policeman risked their lives trying to find him and save the survivors. By dawn 13 people lay dead. This is a true story.

**All was not well in Paradise**, 24 October 2006  
10/10

Author: [Mountain-Storm](http://www.imdb.com/user/ur1933465/comments) from New Zealand

I remember very well the events unfolding in Aramoana as it was broadcast on the TV and radio. I was a Police Officer at the time and the death of a fellow officer was tough news to hear. Seeing the events recreated on screen for the first time brought the memories flooding back. Seeing how even in a relatively peaceful nation such as New Zealand, no-one is immune from random acts of violence was very sobering. I sat bolt upright the entire movie and didn't realise it. The theater was deathly quiet. This is a movie that pulls no punches and has not an inkling of Hollywood in it. It is a sad, dramatic, true to life retelling of the massacre. This type of film is one of the reasons I avoid many of the big budget Hollywood movies. There's no glorification here, no overly animated death scenes, this is movie making at it's best. The story is being told without embellishment and in a sadly beautiful way. A must see for New Zealander's, and for anyone else interested in seeing a powerful, compelling movie. New Zealand's movie of the year, without doubt.

[duncane](http://www.nzcinema.co.nz/member/duncane-18450.php)Reviewed at 02:43pm on 15 Nov 2006

**The Film Of The Year** - This is by far the best film I have seen in years. It is obviously a very dark film, and at times I felt uncomfortable in the theatre watching something that is so personal for so many people. However, I suspect this... [more](javascript:showHide('tr1','tr1m',true);) emotion was something that Robert Sarkies (the director) was specifically aiming for. The material was sensitively handled with very little blood and gore. The film was somewhat sympathetic towards Grey, attempting to give a sense of how he had reached this point rather than portraying him as a serial killer. The cinematography was incredible and several effects (such as blurred shots) were used to effectively give a sense of confusion or anxiousness. All of the actors in this film were fantastic, particularly Karl Urban and newcomer (at 74 yrs of age) Lois Lawn. I can not imagine how this film could be any better, well done to Robert Sarkies.

**Brutal Kiwi Filming** - The balance of character is perfect in this film. It is not over dramitised, and is actually quite deleicate in its shocking nature. It feels very real through the mise-en-scene, and this, inherently invites us as... [more](javascript:showHide('tr2','tr2m',true);) viewers closer to the film, the story, and the town. The title is a brilliant piece of reflection as it reflects the delcate nature of David Grey's mind, and the decision he made on the 13th of November. Overall a selfless and intirinsic goodness in Kiwi's has shone through the brutal subject matter of the film. It is stunning and only vaguely comparable to Gus Van Sant's film 'Elepahnt'. However, 'Out of the Blue' succeeds in putting us there and then. Grey's character is marginal through the film, and the film is very gently sympathetic towards him going crazy. 5/5

# Out Of The Blue

**5:00AM** Thursday Oct 05, 2006  
By [Russell Baillie](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/movies/news/%20/russell-baillie/news/headlines.cfm?a_id=28)



## Matt Sunderland gives an unnerving performance as the solitary and angry David Gray.

Herald rating: \* \* \* \* \*

Of all the deaths depicted in this film of the 1990 Aramoana massacre, the one that sticks with you the most is the last - that of David Gray, the killer of 13 people who was shot by police 22 hours after he started his rampage in the tiny Otago coastal village.

You are left reeling by both the stark brutality and the telling detail of it all.

In the previous two or so hours you have witnessed the unhinged Gray calmly execute many of his neighbours, the local police sergeant, and anyone who strayed into his sights, young or old.

By rights, you should be punching the air with satisfied relief as Gray - an unnerving performance by Matt Sunderland - writhes his last while the squad which has just dealt to him lift their gas masks to light each other's cigarettes.

Except, *Out of the Blue* is not that sort of movie.

It's one that makes you dread every sound of gunshot, every movement in the dark, every death. Even the final and fourteenth.

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It's a powerful piece of work, made more so by a fierce restraint in its delivery. Its makers have shaped a narrative from the haphazard events of that day - and a little before in scenes showing the solitary and angry Gray approaching breaking point - but without making this run to a conventional thriller timetable.

Nor is it the police-centric case study as might have been suggested by basing it on Bill O'Brien's book Aramoana: *Twenty Two Hours of Terror*.

When the violence starts, it is as the title says, out of the blue and all the more devastating for it.

There are a few moments, though, when the storytelling falls away. The frequent shots of the tide at the nearby beach might be a subtle stopwatch on events, but they start feeling like unneeded punctuation.

Similarly, shots of the media pack on the hill above the town showing a TV3 logo on a car - CanWest is one of the film's financial backers - demonstrate that not even a film such as this is immune to product placement.

But those are minor quibbles in a film that otherwise feels like it's done everything that it can to show what it felt like to be caught up in the events of that awful day.

Its portrayals of police and community heroism - especially that of the elderly Helen Dickson - resonate because they come unadorned and played straight in a series of low-key but often gut-wrenching performances.

The depiction of Gray is similarly understated, even in flashbacks establishing his crumbling mental state, whether he's raging at bank tellers or buying another weapon from his local gun dealer.

And later, after he has begun killing, we see Gray contemplating himself in a mirror, which brings to mind the likes of *Taxi Driver*.

He looks haunted, detached, scared - not an only-in-the-movies psycho killer but a man wishing it would all end soon.

It's moments like that which make *Out of the Blue* as intense for its credible portrayal of Gray as it is devastating for its depiction of his actions.

Any film of such an event is, by its nature, exploitative.

But with its clear-eyed and honest approach, *Out of the Blue* doesn't feel that way. It knows it can't answer the big question about the tragedy any better 16 years later than earlier attempts.

It can show us, though, what it felt like to be there. And if that makes it a film to be survived more than enjoyed, it also means it's succeeded as one of the most powerful pieces of New Zealand cinema in an age.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT  
  
I lived in nearby Dunedin during the Aramoana tragedy in 1990. I remember the surreal feeling of that day when we all knew a gunman was on the loose just a few kilometres down the road. It was warm. Not a cloud in the sky. It all seemed so incongruous.   
  
Aramoana always felt like the most peaceful place on earth to me. Its two beaches are breathtakingly beautiful and as a teenager I enjoyed biking out there and sitting at the end of the mole. It's a contemplative place. It feels like the edge of the world.   
  
This tragedy shocked New Zealand in a profound way. It cut to the core of our idyllic self-image of our country - 'gods own country', 'a great place to bring up kids'. Before Aramoana, random violence seemed to happen elsewhere. After 13 November 1990 the violence of the world had come home. For my generation it was the moment New Zealand lost its innocence.

Why tell this story?  
  
The Aramoana tragedy is one of the more significant events in New Zealand's recent history. It was an event that deeply affected New Zealanders at the time. I think it is important to look at significant events like this, to reflect and hopefully learn from them.   
  
These events highlight the positive side of the kiwi spirit as much as darkness of the actions of one man. The people of Aramoana and the police involved acted selflessly to help each other get through that night and I think that is worth remembering, and paying tribute to.   
  
As a filmmaker I was attracted to the way this story involved an entire community in a period of sustained tension. I was intrigued that David Gray was a member of the community rather than an outsider, and by the way other members of the community reacted and helped each other. The story seemed to have something distinctively New Zealand about it. It seemed like an opportunity, framed by tragedy though it is, to explore who we are as a people, or perhaps who we were.

Out of the Blue (DVD)

ReviewedbyShahirDaud  
  
IT IS A shame that Robert Sarkies second feature film had to be renamed just prior to release. One wonders what the haunting title of *Aramoana* would have done for its distribution chances overseas. **Out of the Blue** may be an apt replacement, but it’s far too generic a title for a film this powerful.  
  
Indeed, Sarkies and co-screenwriter Graeme Tetley had their work cut out for them, recreating the terror of a sleepy beachside community, confronted with one of their own beyond the precipice of sanity. David Gray may have robbed Aramoana of thirteen of its residents, but also managed to strengthen the town’s resolve. Consulting on the script, requesting the change in title, and participating in the censorship process, the residents of Aramoana certainly linger both in and out of the films searing frames. To their credit however, in the face of such sensitive material, and so many interested parties, Sarkies and Tetley have crafted a haunting portrait of an idyllic New Zealand shattered by the sound of a rifle.  
  
From the tranquil opening, to the solemn conclusion, Sarkies refuses to glorify David Gray’s terrifying rampage, focusing instead on the response of community who may have been ill-equipped to notice Gray’s downward spiral, let alone survive his final moments. Perhaps the most poignant is Helen Dickson (Lois Lawn), an elderly resident who crawls across a street to place a duvet on another of the wounded. Watching her retreat to her crib and wait in silence as Gray roams freely outside is a breathtaking moment of true human courage.  
  
But this is nothing for the portrayal of Gray himself, stunningly essayed by Matt Sunderland with both incomprehensible rage and insurmountable frailty. In a beautiful moment, Gray removes his permanently affixed balaclava to reveal his bald skull, at once an immediate source of frustration, and a powerful visual revelation that Gray may have just been a sad little man.  
  
For such an important New Zealand film, why does it feel so forgotten only a year since its release? There’s something quite disconcerting about the hoopla surrounding other New Zealand films and their success overseas (I won’t name films), while this gritty slice of kiwiana seems to be drifting away from public consciousness.  
  
And as a film, it’s certainly not without its faults. Karl Urban may add marquee value, and delivers a fine performance as police officer Nick Harvey, but in this particular case, his story doesn’t quite deliver the same dramatic weight as Julie-Anne Bryson’s (Tandi Wright), who almost loses her entire family in the massacre, but is relegated as a secondary character in the film’s third act.   
  
But to state the obvious, *Out of the Blue* is a rare masterpiece showcasing not only an increasingly confident filmmaker, but also revisits a terrifying moment in New Zealand history with such skill and delicacy that the full horror of David Gray’s rampage seems to have been entirely redefined. The tragic loss of so many may be a wound which the township of Aramoana may never fully heal, but *Out of the Blue* reminds us of the rare courage that tragedy can bring about.



QUITE appropriately, the DVD is packaged neatly with several accompanying featurettes and a thoughtful commentary from Sarkies and author Bill O’Brian (whose book *Aramoana: Twenty Two Hours of Terror* is the primary source material). Inevitably, there are a few controversial moments in the retelling, particularly the seemingly indifferent attitude of the anti-terror team who light up cigarettes as David Gray bleeds to death. Sarkies’ explanation doesn’t necessarily assuage concerns, but does highlight his point: to the anti-terror team, Gray’s capture was simply the end of a difficult days work. In actual fact, the anti-terror team stood aside as a medical team attempted to revive Gray, however, this fact is omitted for dramatic effect.  
  
One final note, Greig Fraser’s cinematography makes *Out of the Blue* surely one of the New Zealand’s most beautifully lensed films, and thoughtfully reproduces not only the sleepy sun-drenched sea-side setting, but also faithfully reproduces David Gray’s short sighted vision for stunning effect.  
  
News that *Out of the Blue* has found a UK distributor and may slowly open in the US market is a re-assuring thought for New Zealand filmmakers, but I can only hope that the film will eventually find a larger audience, and cement its place alongside *Once Were Warriors, The Piano, Heavenly Creatures* and *In My Father’s Den*. http://www.lumiere.net.nz/reader/media/images/end.gif

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## Thought I was dreaming

by Philip Matthews

##### The terrible beauty of Out of the Blue.

Out of the Blue is a restrained film about a mass killing in a small community and that restraint means that it often plays out in miniature: one scene standing in for many, one person representing several, a gesture or a look summing up an entire person. It’s a kind of minimalism that is probably a result of budgetary necessity, but has been turned into an aesthetic advantage: as shot in Aramoana and Long Beach by Australian cinematographer Greig Fraser, the film is effortlessly beautiful and unnervingly quiet, and all of the actors seem to be completely at home in their characters. No one really stars here – not Matt Sunderland as killer David Gray, not Karl Urban as quietly heroic cop Nick Harvey – but the acting is uniformly excellent, and not just from them and Tandi Wright, William Kircher and Simon Ferry, from whom you might expect good acting, but from such perfectly cast unknowns as Lois Lawn, Georgina Fabish and Fayth Rasmussen, with the last two playing kids who lose parents.

A natural comparison for this kind of story might be the Gus Van Sant film inspired by the Columbine killings, Elephant. That film took a poetic, time-bending approach to the subject, while also immersing us deep within the perspective of those experiencing the tragedy: from nowhere, without any fanfare or warning, here come the killers. But in a way, Van Sant’s job was easier than that of Out of the Blue’s writers Robert Sarkies and Graeme Tetley: as horrific as it is, at a deep level most of us can understand the impulses behind high-school killings; there’s some atavistic memory of bullying or humiliation. It’s much, much harder to understand or explain what Gray did. Sarkies and Tetley don’t really try, but what is touching about Out of the Blue – it’s perhaps the saddest thing about this sad film – is the pity that they seem to express for Gray. It’s there in two passing moments.

One comes near the end, when Gray is finally caught and shot by the Anti-Terrorist Squad, and he’s on the ground, tied up like a pig and shrieking, and the Anti-Terrorist Squad guys look at each other and light up cigarettes, like hunters celebrating a kill. The other comes earlier, when Gray is hiding out in an empty crib in the middle of the night. He unpacks a radio and flicks between stations. None of us could have any idea what Gray chose to listen to – maybe he wanted to know what they were saying about him on talkback? Maybe he soothed his nerves with classical music? – but Sarkies has imagined that the Chills song “Pink Frost” played on the radio as Gray listened and he has sneaked a second or two into the film. It’s hauntingly apt. The Chills song came from a dream that singer Martin Phillipps had about killing, and his guilt and terror on waking might match the feelings Gray had at the time, when he stopped to reflect or when the full horror of Aramoana dawned on him: “How can I live when you see what I’ve done?”

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## The spirit of Aramoana by Philip Matthews

##### The movie about the 1990 massacre that rocked New Zealand is a restrained, sad, moral tale of a small South Island beach community where everyone knew one another by their first names – even their killer.

The obvious question for someone with as strong an Australian accent as movie producer Tim White is whether he even remembers seeing or experiencing the Aramoana tragedy – the killing of 13 people in November 1990 by lone gunman David Gray – at the time. But White had only been in Australia for a decade by then: he was born, raised and educated in New Zealand; he went to art school with Vincent Ward. Asking White whether Australians immediately weighed it up against their own recent mass shootings – seven dead in Hoddle St, eight dead in the Melbourne Post Office – is irrelevant. To a homesick Kiwi it cut deep. All through that decade, White had craved news from home and got bits and pieces – rugby, quirky items. But the terror and sadness of Aramoana played bigger and hit hard. “I remember being shattered by this thing that was popping up on network news across all the channels,” he says. It connected with and undermined his nostalgia about New Zealand, “fond memories of growing up in South Canterbury, a farm boy and all the rest. I had a misty-eyed view of New Zealand. This was like a bolt out of the blue.”

So he didn’t need much convincing when, more than a decade later, after producing such films as Oscar and Lucinda, Ned Kelly, Angel Baby, Spotswood and No 2, he was approached by Auckland film producer Steven O’Meagher with an idea: Aramoana. White and O’Meagher had been working on another project that had hit a speed bump, O’Meagher says, and he was “walking down Ponsonby Rd feeling blue” when fate or luck steered him into a second-hand bookstore and towards a copy of Bill O’Brien’s Aramoana: Twenty-Two Hours of Terror. The newly reprinted paperback edition sits on the boardroom table before us and every now and then O’Meagher picks up the book, checks a fact, scans the photos. The night before, White, O’Meagher and film director Robert Sarkies had screened their film adapted from O’Brien’s book, Out of the Blue, for media in Auckland and White had spoken of it being “the most intense experience, in terms of responsibility” of the 23 or 24 films he had made. About four days earlier, O’Meagher and Sarkies had hosted four private screenings in Dunedin, for about 70 people connected with the tragedy. All three were now gearing up for screenings at the Toronto Film Festival, where the film would go on to attract three separate offers for North America, each involving a theatrical release.

“Tim’s a classically smart guy,” says O’Meagher. “He knows good material. He’s hard-arse. I gave him two stories. I don’t remember what the other one was – it was, ‘Forget about it.’ You’re not going to die wondering with Tim.” (White is out of the room while O’Meagher says this.) How Sarkies then came on board is an issue that they can’t agree on. O’Meagher says that Sarkies – who grew up in Dunedin and made Scarfies there – was their first and unanimous choice of director; Sarkies says that he heard about the project from a mutual friend, thought to himself, “Gosh, that’s full on”, and phoned White for a “long discussion about the morality of telling this story”. In any event, Sarkies was signed. This was about 2003.

Sarkies’s next job was to read O’Brien’s book. He had the same response as White 13 years earlier in Melbourne: the jarring incongruity of the event, the familiarity of the setting. He recognised the characters that made up the Aramoana com\_munity, he recognised Gray. “I know several David Grays. I see something of myself, in my past life, my twenties, in David Gray. It just happened that my obsession was film.” He was affected by the small, ordinary details: Helen Dickson crawling across a road to put a duvet over a dying man. This kind of flavour – a no-fuss Kiwi modesty – made it into the finished film, as in this exchange between Dickson and that man, Chris Cole, as he slowly bleeds to death:

“How you going?”

“Not so good.”

“I’ll give that ambulance another ring, shall I?”

David Gray was 33. Just before 8.00pm on Tuesday, November 13, 1990, he shot Garry Holden, 38, his next-door neighbour. Then he killed Jasmine Holden and Rewa Bryson, both aged 11. Then James Dickson, 45. Then Tim Jamieson, 69, and Victor Crimp, 70. Then Dion Percy, five, and Ross Percy, 42, and Vanessa Percy, 26. He killed Aleki Tali, 41, and Chris Cole, 61, and Leo Wilson, six. Finally, he killed Sergeant Stu Guthrie, 41. Then he hid from the swarms of police for more than 20 hours.

While preparing to make Out of the Blue, “I was scarily aware of Bad Blood,” Sarkies says. “A brilliant New Zealand film. It was a terrible experience watching it: ‘How can we ever come close to that?’” Filmed on the West Coast in 1981 by British director Mike Newell with two Australians in the lead roles (Jack Thompson and Carol Burns), Bad Blood is about Stanley Graham, who killed seven people in 1941. There are overt similarities and fundamental differences between that story and the Gray one. Both men felt paranoid and victimised; both had been appreciated in their communities for their man-alone can-do qualities (“He’s a resourceful bugger,” someone says admiringly of Graham in Bad Blood); both stories end with the killer’s house being burnt down in an attempt at exorcism. But Newell, maybe because he was an outsider while filming here, is sympathetic to Graham, whose plight seems romantic, almost heroic. In Bad Blood, there is something grotesque and stifling about the solidarity, the Kiwi pack mentality, the wartime conformism of all the others – the quiet men in black suits sipping beer. Graham is trying to break free and, in this account at least, you feel for him. It’s much, much harder to get any kind of sympathetic angle on Gray.

“The difficult thing about the David Gray part of the story was that it couldn’t help but be compelling to us,” Sarkies says. “I was shown photographs of the inside of his crib. Fascinating. You can’t help but be fascinated, but we didn’t want the film to be his story.” At one point over that long night, Gray takes a kip in a crib. It wasn’t his; it belonged to a woman whom Sarkies interviewed 14 years later. She described the ashtray full of cigarette butts that Gray left on the bed, the clock radio he unpacked and listened to. “What would that be like? To have done that and then sit alone all night?” At times, he and co-writer Graeme Tetley even began to feel sorry for Gray, but “there are elements of the story you can’t rationalise. There’s no rational reason for killing 13 people including four kids.”

It’s a restrained, sad, moral film. Its emotional centre is a scene in which police officers played by Karl Urban and Paul Glover rescue three small kids propped up in the back of a ute. There are no street-lights and the night is pitch black. Gray could be anywhere. The cops don’t know it yet, but two of the kids are dead, and the third, three-year-old Stacey Percy, has been shot in the abdomen. Before they see her, they hear her voice: “Don’t shoot me again, please.” Later, Urban’s cop keeps her awake by going over memories of when she played with his son. That’s the haunting thing about Aramoana: everyone knew one another; the cops knew Gray; the cops knew the dead; everyone called Gray by his first name even as he shot at them. The film gets all of that – it gets the spirit of the community. Early on, before the shooting, Gray is described as eccentric, but there’s “no crime in being eccentric. They’d lock up half the Spit.”

The violence, when it comes, is oddly flat, ordinary. And that makes it strange: killing after killing on a warm spring evening near a beach. “When someone gets shot on a beautiful sunny day, all that happens is that someone points a gun and they fall over,” Sarkies says. “There’s not the big close-up, that’s Hollywood.” But the thing about this kind of restraint, the urge to make a positive film about a community and not a dark film about a gunman, is that Gray gets pushed to the edges of the story – marginalised again.

O’Brien’s book is dedicated to “those who died at Aramoana on 13 November 1990”, and there’s a roll call of the 13 dead. But 14 people died over those 22 hours: Gray was the last of them. There’s a way in which he’s become dehumanised, not fit to be remembered. But Sarkies is right: there’s no way of rationalising his actions, justifying them.

The tough task of rehumanising this figure fell to relatively unknown actor Matt Sunderland, who is remarkable in the role, especially as he has almost no dialogue and almost no one to act with. Even before he auditioned, many people – including Sarkies’s brother, Duncan – were repeating “Matt Sunderland – David Gray” like a mantra, such is his ability and intensity (method-style, he lost 17kg to become as thin as Gray was at the end).

White saw him on video and was instantly convinced. “I was in Sydney with casting tapes coming through. My youngest daughter is a wannabe thespian, so she had a great deal of interest in the auditions. The kids were exceptional, the two young actors selected to play Stacey and Chiquita Holden.” Then Sunderland came on screen and a gasp went up in White’s living-room. “I think she said some language I can’t repeat – he is essentially one scary mother. There’s an intensity there. Robert had the benefit of seeing the humanity in the man and there’s plenty of that. There’s a sincere, deep-thinking person at work there. He’s more scary because you do have an empathy: you don’t just see anger, you see pain.”

Can we talk about the Dunedin screenings? “All I can really say is, it was really emotional,” says Sarkies. He needs to stress that the film wasn’t made for the victims, “there was no need for them to see the film of this really hard period in their lives. It was made for New Zealanders. But we wanted to make sure that the film wouldn’t damage the very people it was about.”

O’Brien believes that they have succeeded. He was at the first of the four Dunedin screenings. He still stays in touch with many of the people he interviewed for his book, including Dickson, whom he visits in a nearby rest home. He interviewed 70 people in all and wrote 60,000 words. The book took him only four weeks to write.

“That was my first effort. I’ve now written about 20 books. I mainly write for children now, so that’s quite a change.”

He was still in the police then – he was media liaison officer during the tragedy – and was granted leave to finish the book. It’s the official version and it’s vivid, spooky, thorough. He kept seeing misinformation in the media in the months following the tragedy, journalists and commentators wondering why the police didn’t shoot Gray earlier, whether the police screwed things up, asking why they seemed under-equipped, and that rankled.

“I remember they caught him just before the network news,” says O’Meagher, himself a former journalist. “I remember they were thrilled about that.” He also remembers the media’s general frustration: “For goodness sake, we were told Aramoana was so tiny and yet the police couldn’t find him. Where was he?”

“I was in the police 35 years,” O’Brien says, “and I would say that the operation at Aramoana was as well-conducted as you could possibly do with the resources and the manpower we had. It was an exceptional thing the way they contained that and resolved it. I’ve studied similar situations that happened in other parts of the world. Hungerford, for instance, was much the same [16 people killed in a small English town in 1987], where police were criticised because they didn’t come in with enough weaponry and armed police, but if you’ve got an unarmed service and something happens as quickly as that and you don’t know what it is – you only know that someone’s been shot and there’s a fire – you go to it with the resources you have there and then, and then you call for back-up. The Armed Offenders Squad at that time had good weapons, but David Gray just had better.”

O’Brien’s book was ultimately a tribute to the police, to some startling acts of bravery: searching Gray’s house without knowing whether the killer was in fact inside and waiting for them; ferrying the dead and injured from the crime scene back to safety while the killer was still at large. “It takes a fair bit of guts. I was able to say, ‘Well done, guys.’”

White and O’Meagher optioned O’Brien’s book, but in a way, they also optioned him. Along with Sarkies and Tetley, they persuaded O’Brien that they were going to make a film with sensitivity, tact and integrity, and then they asked him to act as a go-between, to assure the community that they were well-meaning, legit. “It put an onus on me,” O’Brien says. No one connected with the tragedy was against the project, as far as he knows. Most were happy to talk to the film-makers; a few wanted to quietly bow out “and that’s fair enough”. He was impressed that Sarkies and Tetley rented a crib in Aramoana for a week and left the door open for anyone who wanted to come in, talk over the project, argue about ethics.

“I relate it to old soldiers coming back from a war, who don’t talk about war much, even to their families,” Sarkies says. “When they have an opportunity to talk, to a documentarian, or the writer of a book or a film-maker … No one was being forced to talk, but we had really long interviews with people. They told us their stories.”

Sarkies knew many of these people from books, clippings, news footage and a “stunning, incredible” TV doco called Aramoana, produced by Taylormade in Dunedin and made on the proviso that it could be shown once – on the first anniversary of the killings – and never screened again. For him, after seeing all this, the survivors had taken on the patina of movie stars.

The only resistance came from Chiquita Holden. She was nine when she saw her father shot by Gray. She ran into a neighbouring house; her sister Jasmine and her friend Rewa both died there. Fourteen years later, she stood before Sarkies and Tetley and vigorously challenged them on their moral right to make this film. They argued for two hours and Holden left unconvinced. Sarkies continued to feel uncomfortable and six months later, when he and Tetley had a first draft, he contacted her, “but she wrote back and said her views had changed. It was coming up to the 15-year anniversary and she was recognising that the event was part of history.” In the end, she helped Sarkies out with factual details and art department, and so the film, they hope, comes to honour a community as much as mark an event.

“This wasn’t just an odd tale of someone who ended the lives of people that weren’t known to him: the gunman who stood on top of a bridge and fired at cars driving underneath, not much different from the kid who might throw a rock off,” White says. “There was something running much deeper and it involved a whole community.”